

Let Virtue Garnish Thy Thoughts
President's Message, September 2006
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Gratitude

What a joy it has been to participate in so many wonderful experiences with you during the past six months. We visited many of you in camps, youth conferences, and dance celebrations and heard from others through your letters. We are grateful you have shared some of your own spiritual mountaintop experiences. You had weather miracles, health miracles, amazing experiences with special-needs people, and many other miraculous, testimony-building times.

Let me share one experience. Larissa, a young woman with cerebral palsy from southern Alberta, attended a nine-stake encampment. Her biggest concern as she anticipated going to camp was not her physical limitations, but rather the worry that people wouldn't be nice to her. When I saw her at camp, she had friends constantly by her side. Often they were pulling her in a rickshaw because she has weak legs and the distances between activities were long. Everyone there wanted to help her have a successful and happy experience. There was a rappelling wall which required both mental courage and physical strength. With the help of great priesthood leaders on top of the wall and a huge cheering section of young women on the ground, Larissa rappelled off the wall. In her testimony at the end of the week, she told how grateful she was for so many kindnesses from her friends and leaders. She said that she had felt Heavenly Father's love for her because He had answered her prayers of concern and blessed her through so many caring people. Then this little girl stood like a giant and she said, "At camp I have learned I can do hard things, and if I can do hard things then you can too."

As I've told you this experience, I am sure you are remembering your own. Why did you see miracles in your various events this past summer? They happened because you marvelous leaders prepared so well. You were spiritually in tune. Your activities were purposeful and well-planned. You knew and *supported* each girl in her needs. There were also miracles because you got these girls away from their worldly environments so they could be *pure and good and true* to their divine natures in places set apart. And most of all, miracles happened because Heavenly Father loves these, His daughters, and He wants them to know of their true *identity* and feel of His love.

Issues Facing Young Women

As we study and research and then visit with you, we continue to learn about the needs and challenges of young women. Our priesthood leaders recently asked us to identify the three biggest issues in the Church with regards to young women. If you were listening carefully as I talked about successful camps and activities, you already heard me mention the issues we identified. They are (1) identity, (2) worthiness, and (3) support. Each girl needs to begin with an understanding of who she is, her divine *identity* as a daughter of God. If she knows this, it

will enable her to make right choices, keep the commandments, and be worthy of the temple and the blessings of exaltation. Many of your miracles came as girls learned and relearned about who they are and about God's love for them. Living *worthily* is a difficult task for young women in these wicked times. When they are apart from worldliness in sacred settings, they can feel the Spirit. This can change lives in miraculous ways. They learn they can repent of their weaknesses and wrongdoings and return to Heavenly Father. Young women need support in these efforts. They need *support* from family, friends, leaders, priesthood leaders, and the Holy Ghost. They come to know and trust Heavenly Father often through you, His instruments. I will discuss each of these issues—identity, worthiness, and support—in a little more depth.

Identity

Adolescence is a developmental time when a girl is trying to understand who she is and what she should do. It is a time when she naturally faces an identity crisis. And worldly messages add to that crisis telling her she can and should be anything she wants to be that is exotic, famous, wealthy, sexy, gender-changed, and so on. But the doctrines of the gospel point her to her eternal identity and roles.

The proclamation to the world on the family given by prophets and apostles for our day gives a clarion call to young women. It teaches them who they are and what their roles are. Women and young women are taught that we are beloved spirit daughters of heavenly parents with divine natures and destinies. We are reminded that gender is an essential characteristic of our eternal identity and purpose. We further learn that marriage, motherhood, and nurturing are our divinely ordained roles and that we are absolutely essential to His plan.

Words from the prophets in the scriptures also teach us who we are. In the Book of Mormon, Jacob captures the essence of our true natures. He says that women and children have feelings that are “tender and chaste and delicate” (Jacob 2:7) and refers to women throughout his discourse as “the pure in heart” (Jacob 2:10; 3:1–2). I think women *are* tender, chaste, and pure in heart when they are acting as their best selves.

A latter-day prophet, Joseph F. Smith, also taught us that women were among the noble and great spirits needed to come and build the kingdom in these last days. He saw in vision “our glorious Mother Eve, with many of her faithful daughters who had lived through the ages and worshiped the true and living God” (D&C 138:39). I believe that righteous women in our days are included among those God chose from the beginning. Let me modify President Smith's words slightly to allow you to think of yourself in these scriptures:

“I observed that [you] were also among the noble and great ones who were chosen in the beginning to be rulers in the Church of God.

“Even before [you] were born, [you], with many others, received [your] first lessons in the world of spirits and were prepared to come forth in the due time of the Lord to labor in his vineyard for the salvation of the souls of men” (D&C 138:55–56).

This gives a great sense of our purpose, but far too often women get diverted and drift somewhat off course. We forget our identity as daughters of a Father who loves us. The prodigal son in Jesus' parable is such an example. He lost his identity as he made bad choices and didn't keep the commandments. His sins masked who he truly was. He could only change, repent, and come back when he remembered who he was as a son to his father. The scripture says, "And when he *came to himself*, he said, . . . I will arise and go to my father" (Luke 15:17–18; italics added). Coming to himself meant remembering his true identity. My husband captured this insightful moment in a short poem he wrote which applies to each of us as sons and daughters of God:

Your gentle voice recalls me home
However far I stray.
It whispers in my mother tongue
When I have lost the way.

It bids my restless soul to rest
That rests in thee alone,
And calls me back unto myself
When I begin to roam.

Sin is a wandering and a mask,
A hollow vanity.
I am not made for such pretense
Since I am made for thee.
—John S. Tanner

Sin is a wandering and a mask. We want our young women to know that they too are "made for thee," as the poem says. Their deepest and truest identity is as daughters of God, who loves them. Like the prodigal son, when they make mistakes, they can "come to themselves" and repent.

Worthiness

Our 2007 Mutual theme is a scriptural admonition that, if followed, will help us to be worthy, to be our true and best selves. It is in D&C 121:45: "Let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God." Listen as my granddaughters teach this message in a simple way:

"I like to look for rainbows whenever there is rain
And ponder on the beauty of an earth made clean again.
I want my life to be as clean as earth right after rain.
I want to be the best I can and live with God again."
—"When I Am Baptized," *Children's Songbook* (1989), 103

As the song says, we want to be clean and pure and virtuous so as to be in God's presence again.

Our theme scripture admonishes us to "let virtue garnish our thoughts unceasingly," and then it promises us that our "confidence shall wax strong in the presence of God." This has long been one of my favorite scriptures because of its richness in meaning. Let's look closely to find some of that depth.

First, what is "virtue"? It is not only chastity and purity, but also strength, courage, and valor. It is morality and moral excellence. These virtuous qualities should "garnish" or *adorn* all of our thoughts. That means virtuous thoughts are chaste, clean, and pure. But there is even more to it. The first part of the scripture tells us we must be full of charity and full of faith: "Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, and to the household of faith." Virtuous thoughts, then, must also be charitable, faithful, hopeful, trusting, courageous, positive, grateful, and uplifting thoughts. Thoughts that are not garnished with these virtuous qualities might be despairing, negative, critical, self-pitying, impure, and unclean. How many of us and our young women struggle with such thoughts?

Virtuous thoughts invite confidence. They elevate us, increase our faith in Jesus Christ, and promise the "constant companionship of the Holy Ghost." The opposite kinds of thoughts rob us of that Spirit and remove us from the presence of God. They take us on a downward spiral, making us vulnerable to Satan's deceptions and temptations. Let us seek "anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy" (Articles of Faith 1:13).

To have virtuous thoughts "unceasingly" may appear to be quite a difficult, if not impossible, goal for most of us. But with practice and exercise, we can get better and better. The word "wax" means to grow toward full development. If we are to "wax" or grow strong, this means that we have not fully arrived yet, but we have that potential. Growth usually requires change and repentance. When we have repented and are clean, we will again have increased confidence in the presence of the Lord.

As we "let virtue garnish our thoughts unceasingly," we will become worthy to be in the presence of the Lord. On earth we can be in His presence when we are in His house, the temple. This scriptural theme, if followed, will prepare us to be worthy to enter into His house and be in His presence there. To prepare young women to be worthy and ready to enter the temple and make and keep sacred covenants should be among our highest goals as Young Women leaders. The blessings promised to us in this scripture are blessings we receive in His presence and in His house: confidence in the presence of God, the doctrine of the priesthood distilled upon our souls, the Holy Ghost as a constant companion, our scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth, and our dominion an everlasting dominion. (See D&C 121:45–46.)

How can we help young women have virtuous thoughts, actions, and lives? How can I help my little granddaughters to continue to be as virtuous and lovely through their Young Women years as they are today so they can be worthy to enter the temple? Why do you think I

had them sing for you today? To boast? Only partly. To get a message on purity to you sisters? Only partly. Mostly I wanted them to sing that song to get a message inside of their teachable hearts. I care so much about them. What I yearn for in their lives is what I want for all young women everywhere. Recently I wrote from my heart: “What I want my granddaughters to know”:

1. Identity—You are a daughter of God.
 Being a woman is a happy thing.
 You have a divine nature with natural tender tendencies.
2. You have sacred roles.
 You have a mission and purpose.
 Desire to be a mother.
 Prepare to be a mother.
3. Use tender inclinations (nurturing) in all relationships.
 With current family, with friends, with boys, with a future husband.
4. You are an integral part of the priesthood that has been restored to the earth.
 It blesses you through all the ordinances.
 It blesses you with spiritual gifts.
 You need it for exaltation.
 Your role in it is side-by-side with your husband.
 Through the priesthood, you become complete.
5. Your gift which is precious above all else is your chastity (virtue).
 Be chaste.
 Be modest.
 Be kind and respectful of your body—not taking undue risks, keeping the principles of the Word of Wisdom, dressing appropriately.
 Be kind and respectful of your mind—don’t pollute it; educate it.
 Be kind and respectful of your spirit—care about media choices; cultivate ability to listen to the Holy Ghost.
6. Keep focused on the temple.
 Learn what happens there—it is God’s house. His Spirit dwells there. No unclean thing can be there.
 Be prepared, and keep temple worthy.
7. Have faith in and a testimony of Jesus Christ.
 He is the light, the life, and the hope of the world.
 You can repent of your mistakes and weaknesses because of Him and His Atonement.
8. Use your gift of the Holy Ghost.
 He can be your constant companion.
 He will comfort you, give you peace.
 He will guide you in all decisions.
 He will help you feel love, joy, testimony, knowledge, patience, and all the attributes that you need to make it through this earth life.
9. Be a light, a standard, an influence for good on others by always inviting the Spirit

into your life.

10. Make your homes happy, Spirit-filled sanctuaries, set apart from the world.
Develop your gifts to serve, not to be famous.
In short, be more Christlike.

Generations are depending upon these young women and their virtuous lives. They have to understand who they are, what their purpose is, and why they must be pure. President Packer said:

“Teach the children the plan of salvation, the sacredness of the body, the supernal nature of the power to give life. Mothers, guide them, warn them against misusing those sacred powers in your gentle way. The future of the family depends on how those powers are protected.

“The devil has no body. He and his angels try to possess the bodies of mankind.

“When the sacred power to give life is used immorally, unnaturally, or in perversion, one stands in jeopardy of failing the test of mortality. Even then, through true repentance, the mercy of the Holy One has power to reclaim and to heal” (“Children of God,” BYU Women’s Conference, May 5, 2006).

Our prophets and apostles have absolutely pertinent messages for our girls about their purposes and about staying on course. President Hinckley said: “There is nothing in all this world as magnificent as virtue. It glows without tarnish” (“How Can I Become the Woman of Whom I Dream,” *Ensign*, May 2001, 95).

Now I would like to invite your participation. What kinds of issues are the girls facing that might tarnish their virtue? What are the biggest challenges they face that lead them away from pure and virtuous lives? (Possible answers: immodesty, bad language, pornography, media, steady dating, inappropriate intimacy, peer pressure.)

Immodesty – “Young women, choose your clothing the way you would choose your friends—in both cases choose that which improves you and would give you confidence standing in the presence of God. Good friends would never embarrass you, demean you, or exploit you. Neither should your clothing” (Jeffrey R. Holland, “To Young Women,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2005, 29).

Bad Language – “If you have the habit, how do you break it? You begin by making a decision to change. The next time you are prone to use words you know to be wrong, simply stop. Keep quiet or say what you have to say in a different way. As you practice such restraint, it will become easy. President Heber J. Grant was wont to say, ‘That which we persist in doing becomes easier for us to do; not that the nature of the thing itself is changed, but that our power to do is increased.’”

“We begin with self-discipline. Shakespeare put these words in the mouth of Hamlet:

*Refrain tonight,
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
To the next abstinence: the next more easy;
For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
And either master the devil, or throw him out
With wondrous potency (Hamlet, Act 3, scene 4, lines 165-70)”*
(Gordon B. Hinckley, “Take Not the Name of God in Vain,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1987, 47).

Pornography – “Do all that you can to avoid pornography. If you ever find yourself in its presence—which can happen to anyone in the world in which we live—follow the example of Joseph of Egypt. When temptation caught him in her grip, he left temptation and ‘got him out’ ” (Dallin H. Oaks, “Pornography,” *Ensign*, May 2005, 90).

Media – “The standard is clear. If something we think, see, hear, or do distances us from the Holy Ghost, then we should stop thinking, seeing, hearing, or doing that thing. If that which is intended to entertain, for example, alienates us from the Holy Spirit, then certainly that type of entertainment is not for us. Because the Spirit cannot abide that which is vulgar, crude, or immodest, then clearly such things are not for us” (David A. Bednar, “That We May Always Have His Spirit to Be with Us,” *Ensign*, May 2006, 30).

Steady Dating – “Steady dating at an early age leads so often to tragedy. Studies have shown that the longer a boy and girl date one another, the more likely they are to get into trouble.

“It is better, my friends, to date a variety of companions until you are ready to marry. Have a wonderful time, but stay away from familiarity. Keep your hands to yourself. It is not easy, but it is possible” (Gordon B. Hinckley, “A Prophet’s Counsel and Prayer for Youth,” *Ensign*, Jan. 2001, 8).

Inappropriate Intimacy – “The boundaries of appropriate behavior are defined by God. . . . Do not touch the private sacred parts of another person’s body to stimulate those emotions. Do not allow anyone to do that with you, with or without clothing. Do not arouse those emotions in your own body. These things are wrong. Do not do them. Such practices would undermine your ability to be inspired by the Holy Ghost in the vitally important decisions you must make for your future. They lead to binding addictions and grievous transgressions” (Richard G. Scott, “The Power of Righteousness,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1998, 69).

Peer Pressure – “Some are tempted to be immoral because they want to be accepted by their peers. For the young men, it may mean acceptance based on some sort of macho image. For the young women, it may be the need to feel they are accepted by having a boyfriend. Acceptance by your peers must not come at the expense of your virtue and self-esteem” (M. Russell Ballard, “Purity Precedes Power,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1990, 36).

Our young people need courage to carry on in virtuous living. President Hinckley gives the needed encouragement:

“To our young people, the glorious youth of this generation, I say, be true. Hold to the faith. Stand firmly for what you know to be right.

“You face tremendous temptation. It comes at you in the halls of popular entertainment, on the Internet, in the movies, on television, in cheap literature, and in other ways—subtle, titillating, and difficult to resist. Peer pressure may be almost overpowering. But, my dear young friends, you must not give in. You must be strong. You must take the long look ahead rather than succumbing to the present seductive temptation. . . .

“God bless you, my dear young friends. You are the best generation we have ever had. You know the gospel better. You are more faithful in your duties. You are stronger to face the temptations which come your way. Live by your standards. Pray for the guidance and protection of the Lord. He will never leave you alone. He will comfort you. He will sustain you. He will bless and magnify you and make your reward sweet and beautiful. And you will discover that your example will attract others who will take courage from your strength” (“An Ensign to the Nations, a Light to the World,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2003, 83–84).

What a blessing for the whole Church to be led by a powerful prophet of God. We feel the ability to carry on just by listening to his wise counsel. Called and inspired leaders can do that for us. Leaders have an especially powerful influence in the lives of our young women, which brings me to the final issue, support.

Support

I began by telling you about Larissa, who has cerebral palsy. Her miracles at camp came because of caring leaders, dedicated priesthood brethren, and sensitive friends. In the same vein, I read a letter written by some young women who attended Heber Valley Camp who felt the senior missionary couples who had warmly cared for them all week were one of the greatest blessings of their whole camp experience. Bryan, a fine young married man, made this same point as he visited our presidency in my office. We asked him what had the greatest impact in keeping him worthy and active in the Church during his youth. Here is what he said: “The youth programs aren’t great in themselves. I know it takes individuals and leaders being great in the lives of the youth that make the programs great. [The youth need] someone to love them and lead them to Christ. . . . I remember a seminary teacher who showed unconditional love even when I was most disruptive and a member of a stake presidency issuing inspired promises which stirred my soul. It was those few who went out of their way to love me and grabbed my attention enough to point me to Christ, which I am most grateful for” (personal letter).

Young women need caring adults in their lives. Research has confirmed this idea that relationships for youth with Latter-day Saint peers and adults are more important than the content of programs and activities.

You leaders have the responsibility and ability to be that person who will make a difference, who will have a spiritual impact, who will love and accept a young person. Of course parents have the primary responsibility, but often youth are exerting their independence from their parents during this developmental stage. The research shows that adolescence is an important time to learn to be independent from parents and to establish relationships with others. Healthy youth development depends on good relationships outside the family as well as within. A good relationship with even one adult can provide an otherwise deprived teen with the ability to succeed in the adult world.

When active LDS girls were asked to identify the significant non-parental adults in their lives, the three most important ones were older siblings, grandmothers, and Young Women leaders. *You* are important. *You* are crucial. *You* are the example. *You* are the one who cares. *You* are the one who will teach them who they really are. *You* are the one who will teach them the value of being virtuous in their thoughts and lives and actions. *You* are the one who will let them know they can repent and be clean. We love and appreciate *you*, and we know Heavenly Father loves and appreciates *you*.

During the Savior's ministry, one woman, who was part of a great multitude "thronging" about Him, was healed by touching His clothes. He immediately felt that "*virtue* had gone out of him" (Mark 5:30; italics added). She was a believing woman in need of help. He was her leader, and He was endowed with knowledge and power to bless His people. We do not have the priesthood power He has. Nevertheless, He has called us to be His instruments to likewise help young women. When they come to us in need, when they reach out to be in touch with someone for help, the Lord will send His loving, teaching, healing strength through us to them. Let virtue garnish our thoughts unceasingly, that we may be pure vessels prepared with His Spirit to fulfill the sacred duties of our holy callings. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.